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Memoir, Autobiography, or Fiction? Life Writing in Modern Jewish Literature

The difficulty in providing a satisfying definition of the genre involving personal narratives about the vicissitudes of the self has been the subject of heated scholarly debates in the autobiography studies, an increasingly popular and a relatively recent field. Is autobiography a literary representation of "the impossible quest for self-knowledge" (Marcus Moseley)? Is it "an individual's presumably truthful, rational exposition of his or her own life story"? Or, is it a "capricious genre ranging from works of fiction, through traditional autobiography, to various forms of [memoirs,] diaries, journals, and even scholarly writing" (Sarah Pratt)?

The course will explore the borderlands between memoir, autobiography and fiction in Jewish life writing through the lens of the Eastern European Jewish experience. Employing gender and comparative approach as analytical lenses, we will read several autobiographical works and address the following questions: how to deal with problems of memory in personal narratives? How to distinguish between truth, self-fashioning, and fiction in autobiographical writing? What role does the immigrant experience play in Jewish autobiographical narratives? The texts and class discussion will be in English.

Session 1

Introduction

Pauline Wengeroff, *Rememberings: The World of a Russian-Jewish Woman in the 19th Century* (1910)

Session 2

I. L. Peretz, *My Memoirs* (1913-14); Sholem Aleichem, *From the Fair: An Autobiography of Sholem Aleichem* (1908-1916)

Session 3

Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (1925); *Red Ribbon on a White Horse: My Story* (1951)
Malka Lee, *Through the Eyes of the Childhood* (selections)

Session 4

Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile: A Memoir (An Autobiographical Trilogy, 1984)*, *Meshugah* (1994), selected stories from *In My Father's Court: A Memoir* (1966), "The Cafeteria"

Session 5

Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1990)

Session 6

Gary Shteyngart, *Little Failure: A Memoir* (2014)

Required texts (all available for purchase online or at the YIVO library)

- 1) Pauline Wengeroff, *Rememberings: The World of a Russian-Jewish Woman in the 19th Century* (1910)
- 2) I. L. Peretz, *My Memoirs* (1913-14);
- 3) Sholem Aleichem, *From the Fair: An Autobiography of Sholem Aleichem* (1908-1916)
- 4) Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (1925);
- 5) Anzia Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse: My Story* (1951)
- 6) Malka Lee, *Through the Eyes of the Childhood* (selections)
- 7) Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile: A Memoir (An Autobiographical Trilogy, 1984)*,
- 8) Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Meshugah* (1994)
- 9) Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1990)
- 10) Gary Shteyngart, *Little Failure: A Memoir* (2014)